Subjective Usability Feedback from the Field over a Network

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SUMMARY
How can good continuous feedback about the effectiveness of a computer-human interface be obtained from distributed users?

At the Jet Propulsion I Amatory, different parts of a multimission ground data system (which are maintained by different groups) are loosely integrated and customized by flight projects on their workstations to support their own mission operations organizations. Each project and team chooses the pieces it wants and is responsible for configuring them in its preferred way. As a result, users have many different configurations, effectively precluding the development of a centralized help facility and limiting the practicality of many usability techniques.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there arc significant usability problems with the interfaces that people and teams configure for themselves. It is typical for a flight project to pay experienced ground system personnel to support thcm on a daily basis, creating and revising scripts, graphical user interfaces, and things that break. This leads to spur-of-the-moment patches and workarounds made with scripts that are not well documented nor well managed, and with little consideration of long-term usability issues. It is unlikely that upcoming low-cost projects will be able to afford this service. If there were an effective way to get feedback about similar problems people have across different flight projects, changes could be requested in the delivered system and default configurations which would reduce the need for this expensive hand-holding. While there is a process in place for reporting and tracking system "failures", there is no good way to get a consistent record of usability and operability concerns.

Because our users arc geographically distributed, wc would like to obtain information from them over the network about their operational concerns. Automated measures of their activity arc of limited usc because we are not experts in their tasks. We would like their candid assessment of what they feel contributes to and what they feel reduces their productivity in their own context.

What are tools and techniques that can be used to motivate users to communicate useful subjective usability information to us over the network, with a minimum effort on their part?

ISSUES

What kinds of useful subjective usability feedback can be obtained over a network?
What approaches and techniques can be used to:
- secure the willingness and confidence of users to communicate usability problems and concerns,
- assist thcm in recognizing useful feedback,
- assist them in communicating feedback with minimum effort?

STRUCTURE

The structure of this SIG is informal discussion moderated by the session leader. Additional issues or concerns in the area of remote usability evaluation are welcome. The first five minutes of the session will be used to create and prioritize a list of specific topics for discussion. Copies of an audiotape of the session or meeting notes will be available to SIG participants after the conference.